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## Theorising cult cosmopolitanism: the transnational reception of Bollywood as cult cinema

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### ABSTRACT

Despite India's status as one of the leading centres of global film production, and the passion for Bollywood exhibited by fans worldwide, it is notable that Indian cinema very rarely features within lists of cult films compiled by scholars or fans in the West. Unlike the popular cinemas of Hong Kong and Japan, which have built up a significant transnational cult following, Bollywood has been relatively absent from the established canons of cult cinema. In recent years, however, a number of websites and fan publications have started to frame Indian cinema as an object of cult interest and this is therefore an opportune moment to explore the cultural politics of this burgeoning form of transnational reception. In proposing that we theorise this as 'cult cosmopolitanism' – designating the cosmopolitan embrace of cultural difference through cult reception practices – this article considers the implications that this phenomenon has for our understanding of the transnational circulation of Indian cinema and global popular cinemas more generally.

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What happens to our understanding of popular Indian cinema when we frame it through discourses of cult cinema, and conversely, what happens to our understanding of cult cinema when we frame it through engagements with Indian cinema? This article responds to these two interrelated questions by investigating the small, but growing, presence of Indian cinema within discourses of cult. One of the indicators of this growing relationship is the increasing number of references to cult and exploitation cinema within contemporary Indian films. In Vikramaditya Motwane's coming of age drama *Udaan/Flight* (Motwane, 2010), for example, the 17-year-old protagonist is expelled from school after being caught watching *Angoor/Grape* (Shah, 2005), an exploitation film from the notorious B-grade director Kanti Shah. Celebrated by fans as the Indian equivalent of Ed Wood (Times of India 2011), Shah is a director, producer and writer of low-budget exploitation films and is best known for his late 1990s crime films *Loha/Iron* (Shah, 1997) and *Gunda/Hooligan* (Shah, 1998) which feature faded Bollywood stars such as Dharmendra and Mithun Chakraborty. Meanwhile, Ashim Ahluwalia's *Miss Lovely* (2012) delves even further into Mumbai's cinematic history of exploitation films, following the fictionalised story of two brothers Vicky and Sonu Duggal who make low-budget sex-horror pictures designed to play on a circuit of fleapit cinemas

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outside of the metropolitan centres. Modelled on real-life trash film-makers such as Kanti Shah, Mohan Bhakri and Vinod Talwar, the Duggal bros produce films evocative of genuine titles from the period such as *Kabrastan/The Graveyard* (Bhakri, 1988) and *Khooni Panja/The Bloody Claw* (Talwar, 1991). While *Udaan* is a relatively mainstream Bollywood production and *Miss Lovely* is aesthetically closer to an elliptical art film than the exploitation features it takes as its subject, the films have nonetheless drawn attention to a long history of Indian exploitation cinema that has rarely been addressed in academic scholarship and has rarely crossed over to non-diasporic audiences interested in global popular cinemas.

Indeed, when Jonathan Romney reported on *Miss Lovely* in *Sight and Sound* magazine, he described it as ‘an Indian film like I’d never seen’ that ‘follows the 1980s misadventures of an aspiring filmmaker struggling at the very arse-end of Bollywood’ (Romney 2012). Meanwhile, Canadian critic Kier-La Janisse argued that the significance of the film for non-diasporic audiences is that ‘it taps into all the licentious elements that would attract a western exploitation film audience while presenting a history we know virtually nothing about’ (Janisse 2014). These statements are rather telling. India is one of the few truly global centres of film production, with a long history of producing low-budget horror, science fiction and fantasy cinema, yet it is notable that these Indian genre films have, until recently, rarely crossed over to non-diasporic audiences in the West – an audience demographic that Edward Chan has termed NBCs (Non-Traditional Bollywood Consumers) (2008, 264).

In this article, I focus my analysis on this emerging engagement with Indian cinema in order to theorise the politics of ‘cult cosmopolitanism’ – a term I am coining to describe the cosmopolitan embrace of cultural difference through cult reception practices. In developing this concept, I am drawing on Henry Jenkins’ use of the term ‘pop cosmopolitanism’ to theorise a shift away from a cosmopolitanism based around sophistication and high culture to instead refer to the myriad ways ‘that the transcultural flows of “popular culture” inspire new forms of global consciousness and cultural competency’ (2006, 156). Jenkins was writing about the growing Anglo-American fan interest in Asian popular culture and he positions this as a potentially positive shift in their cosmopolitan engagement, yet he notes that this pop cosmopolitanism ‘walks a thin line between dilettantism and connoisseurship, between orientalist fantasies and a desire to honestly connect and understand an alien culture, between assertion of mastery and surrender to cultural difference’ (2006, 164). As we will see, these tensions become even more acute when we focus our attention specifically on cult reception practices. Given this emphasis upon the issues raised by cross-cultural engagement, then, my focus here is primarily on the reception of Indian cinema amongst NBCs in the West, rather than audiences within India or the South Asian diaspora. As Brian Larkin argues in his research into the reception of Indian cinema in Nigeria, there is a need to ‘examine the specific reasons why Indian film travels; how its appeal shifts across differing societies and sometimes in the same society over time’ (2008, 216). While there is much to be said about the developing cult fandom within Indian itself, this article focuses its attention specifically upon the cult reception of Indian cinema in the West in order to explore the political questions raised by this process of cultural engagement.

## Absences and gaps

While scholarship on Indian cinemas has been flourishing in the last decade, the academic discussion of Indian genre cinema – and especially the B-grade industry – has

been relatively limited. This is not altogether surprising. Scholarship on world cinema has traditionally privileged art cinemas and prestige pictures over the low-budget genre films aimed at domestic audiences. It is notable, however, that this emphasis on prestige has started to change, with increasing numbers of scholars engaging with less-reputable genres such as the cycle of 1930s stunt films featuring Fearless Nadia (Thomas 2015), the 1950s cycle of wrestling pictures featuring Dara Singh (Vitali 2010) and the 1980s cycle of horror films directed by the Ramsay Brothers (Nair 2012). Nevertheless, this growing body of work on B-genres within Indian cinema has tended to avoid framing these works in relation to notions of cult cinema. Similarly, while there has been some excellent work on fandom within India (see Srinivas 2000; Punathambekar 2007, 2013), this too has had limited engagement with discourses of cult. Preminda Jacob's *Celluloid Deities* is one of the few studies of Indian cinema to mention the term, arguing that the 'closest Western analogy' to the participatory behaviours of South Indian film audiences would be 'Hollywood cult films and the midnight movie experience' (2009, 231), yet it is telling that Jacob is using this primarily as a comparison of participatory viewing practices rather than investigating what cult might mean within an Indian context. It is evident that we need to do more to interrogate the assumed West-centrism of cult discourse, and to examine the suitability of the term for understanding films and fandoms outside of the US and Western Europe.

Meanwhile, if we look at existing scholarship on cult cinema, it is clear that Indian cinema is conspicuous by its absence. No Indian films are discussed in the three major edited collections on cult cinema: *The Cult Film Experience: Beyond All Reason* (1991), *Unruly Pleasures: The Cult Film and Its Critics* (2000), and *Defining Cult Movies: The Cultural Politics of Oppositional Taste* (2003). Of course, this isn't necessarily remarkable – each book is largely case study based and makes no claim to being comprehensive in its coverage of cult cinema. Yet, even the most exhaustive fan listings of cult cinema such as *Videohound's Cult Flicks & Trash Pics* (2002) which contains 1311 titles, and *The Psychotronic Encyclopaedia of Film* (1983) which contains over 3000, still make no reference to Indian films. To some extent, this reflects the Western bias of the canon of cult cinema with its emphasis upon American and Western European films, but it is notable that a publication such as *Videohound's Dragon: Asian Action and Cult Flicks* (2003) which deliberately focuses on Asian cult cinemas includes only eight Indian films<sup>1</sup> and this compares to over 250 films from Japan and over 700 from Hong Kong. The book even features a sidebar explaining that 'when this book was in the planning stages, there weren't going to be any Indian movie reviews' (2003, 320), and the editors admit that the inclusion of Indian cinema was very much an afterthought.

As these omissions suggest, while Indian cinema has an extensive history of international distribution, it has rarely been framed as an object of cult interest by fans or scholars in the West. Unlike the popular cinemas of Hong Kong and Japan, which have a number of cross-over generic traditions such as wuxia and J-Horror, Indian genre cinema has not crossed over to this audience of cultists, and it is notable that the growing cult interest in the West for Asian cinemas (see Martin 2015) rarely extends to films from India. This is not to say that Indian cinema fails to crossover to non-diasporic audiences in all national contexts – there is a long history of popularity within the Soviet Union, the Middle East and North Africa, for example (see Rajagopalan 2008; Athique 2008; Larkin 2008). We should remember that 'simply because a circuit of media flow does not include countries like the United States or the United Kingdom does not make it less global' (Punathambekar 2007,

208). It is nevertheless clear, however, that the global interest in Bollywood has tended not to extend to non-diasporic audiences in the West and it is important that we address this. As Kaushik Bhaumik has observed, 'although Bombay films are shown in considerable numbers in mainstream cinema halls in the West as well as readily available in subtitled video and DVD formats they have not succeeded in attracting non-diasporic Western audiences' (2006, 188). Interestingly, Bhaumik goes on to mention a 'fringe cult following for Bombay cinema amongst non-diasporic Western audiences that from time to time surfaces on the internet' (2006, 192), but this is only a brief aside and he doesn't develop the point further. What Bhaumik is describing, although he doesn't frame it in these terms, is the growing influence of what has come to be known as the 'new cinephilia' and the ways in which this is impacting reception practices surrounding popular world cinema. As David Desser has noted: 'The combination of the inexpensive availability of films on VCD and DVD and the many web-based discussion sites creates not only "cult" figures ... but a new kind of cinephilia' (2005, 212). In recent years, the 'fringe cult following' that Bhaumik alludes to has developed markedly through a variety of channels including some limited formal distribution and a developing online fan presence and, as I will now outline, this developing new cinephilia has much to tell us about the processes underpinning the phenomenon I am terming cult cosmopolitanism. Desser's account of the new cinephilia focuses upon the Western fandom for Hong Kong cinema so, in order to situate the recent cult interest in Indian cinema and to frame it in relation to the prevailing scholarly debates, it is important that we first address this earlier crossover success.

### From Hong Kong to Mumbai

In his book *Planet Hong Kong*, David Bordwell provides the most detailed academic account to date of the cult fandom for Hong Kong cinema within the West. Discussing the fan culture represented by self-published zines such as *Eastern Heroes*, *Hong Kong Film Connection* and *Asian Trash Cinema*, Bordwell details the various ways in which fanzines, and later websites, helped grow a devoted cult audience in the West. For Bordwell, these 'hardcore Western fans form an authentic subculture' (2011, 57) and he does not see this reception as limited to Hong Kong films but instead argues that a number of 'local' cinemas have reached international audiences through subcultural engagement, citing the further examples of Japanese anime, Indian melodramas, Italian horror, Mexican masked-wrestler films and Indonesian fantasies. In each case, 'a local cinema has achieved international reach by becoming a subcultural cinema' (2011, 59). This notion of treating a local cinema as a 'subcultural cinema' has been justifiably critiqued by Meaghan Morris as focusing exclusively on a particular set of Western practices, and failing to address the reach of Hong Kong cinema 'into many different countries, and to diverse communities' (2005, 11), but nevertheless, it does accurately describe one of the ways in which films have travelled outside of their national contexts and offers a useful model for considering the burgeoning cult for Indian cinema.

Most importantly, it allows us a framework through which to consider the cultural politics of this form of reception. The fetishising of Asian products in the West – what Darrell Y. Hamamoto has termed *Asiaphilia* – has often been critiqued for its underlying power relations and reliance upon processes of cultural appropriation. As Hamamoto explains, 'Asiaphilia is a deceptively benign ideological construct that naturalizes and justifies the systematic appropriation of cultural property and expressive forms created by Yellow people'



(2000, 12). These issues have subsequently preoccupied a number of scholars discussing the subcultural reception of Hong Kong cinema in the West. Leon Hunt, for example, notes that British television ‘programmes like the nostalgic *I Love Kung Fu* confirm that it is possible to both “love” something and condescend to it, especially if it constitutes a cultural Other’ (2003, 12). Similarly, Julian Stringer describes the ambivalence of the Western reception of Hong Kong cinema in which ‘subcultural video fans would seem to be offering an “enabling or empowering identification” with Hong Kong film culture’ yet are also ‘engaged in a simultaneous “exploitative appropriation” of that same culture’ (1996, 61). Underpinning much of this discussion is the question of whether this subcultural ‘romance with Asia tends to be a flirtation with the exotic rather than an attempt at any genuine intercultural understanding’ (Marchetti 1993, 1). In contrast to accounts that place emphasis on these dangers of exoticisation, however, David Desser offers a more optimistic account of this fandom that focuses precisely on its potential for furthering intercultural understanding, arguing that ‘Anime and Hong Kong film fans’ ability to identify across cultural, racial, and gender bounds bespeaks the fluidity of identity within the postmodern context’ (2003, 193). Moreover, he takes heart in ‘a genuine opening up of U.S. culture and society to these Asian influences, especially on the part of today’s youth’ (2003, 197). While this form of cross-cultural fandom clearly raises issues surrounding exoticisation and cultural appropriation, Desser’s intervention draws attention to the ways in which it also reflects a potentially promising attempt to connect with, and understand, another culture.

Interestingly, in a later essay, Desser makes a direct comparison between the established cinephilia surrounding Hong Kong cinema and the developing cult interest in Indian film. For him, the entry of Hindi cinema into Western cinephile circles through ‘the offering of Hindi films on web-sites previously the domain of Hong Kong, Japan and Korea’ (2005, 219) represents a shift in the attentions of the new cinephilia and an auspicious development in the crossover history of Indian cinema. Nevertheless, as Kaushik Bhaumik notes, there are still substantial differences between the reception of Hong Kong martial arts films and Bollywood films in the West. For him, the ‘initial exuberance with which the West embraced Hong Kong cinema and the iconic status of Bruce Lee’ lies in contrast to the ways in which Bombay cinema ‘was smuggled in through the backdoor of diasporic cultures and was soon dismembered and recomposed into a cultural chic leaving the films more or less untouched beyond the diasporas’ (2006, 193). Part of the difference is, of course, down to distribution – Hong Kong martial arts films were produced with an eye on the export market while the majority of Hindi films were produced primarily for the domestic and diasporic markets. Nevertheless, there is also the issue of structural blindnesses within the Western reception. While ‘the cult status of Kung-Fu, anime and J-horror is largely undisputed’ (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 129), Indian cinema has been largely absent from the canons of cult cinema and this is partly due to a lack of engagement from Western fans. This has started to shift in recent years, however, and it is therefore necessary that we attend to the cultural politics of this emerging form of cross-cultural engagement.

## **Bollywood cult/cult Bollywood**

One of the key figures within the growing cult interest in Indian cinema is British author and distributor Pete Tombs who wrote about Indian horror films in a chapter of his influential book *Mondo Macabro: Weird and Wonderful Cinema Around the World* (1997), produced a

short documentary on South Asian genre cinema for Channel 4 in 2002, and subsequently released three DVD sets of Bollywood Horror through his Mondo Macabro label including titles such as the Ramsay Brothers' films *Bandh Darwaza/The Closed Door* (Ramsay, 1990), featuring Anirudh Agarwal as a vampire modelled on Dracula, and *Mahakaal/The Monster* (Ramsay, 1993), the Ramsay's subsequent reworking of *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984). Tombs' work has been critiqued for exoticising the films that he is celebrating and it is notable that his book is cited within the introduction to *Defining Cult Movies* as the primary example of a trend for cult fandom to celebrate the 'weird and wonderful' of world cinema 'in a way that has no interest in the meaning of those films within the contexts of their own production' (Jancovich et al. 2003, 4). This dismissal, however, actually misrepresents to some extent what Tombs was doing in his work. Each chapter of his book and each episode of the subsequent TV series were focused on a specific national and historical context and were designed to introduce the reader or viewer to the industries involved. It may be a celebration of the 'weird and wonderful' of world cinema but that certainly doesn't mean that it had no interest in the meaning of the films within their contexts of production. Rather I would suggest that Tombs' work exemplifies what I am calling cult cosmopolitanism in that it is reliant on a fetishising of cultural difference – a focus on what Koichi Iwabuchi would call the 'cultural odour' (2002, 27) of these films – and it is a fetishisation of perceived cultural difference that is at the heart of this form of reception.

We can see this even more acutely when we turn our attention to an earlier example of this crossover appeal – the appearance of Bollywood filmsong in underground music culture in the 1990s. As David Novak has identified, 'the growing North American reception of Bollywood is not necessarily based on the films themselves but on excerpts from classic Bollywood films, especially song-and-dance sequences' (2010, 40). This music is subsequently sampled by DJs and compiled for Western consumption on albums like *Doob Doob O Rama* and *Bizarro Bollywood*, while clips are traded amongst collectors and feature on video mixtapes, with a particular emphasis on filmsongs that could be celebrated as exotic kitsch. As Edward Chan has described in his account of the entry of Indian filmsong into American popular culture:

Much of that trajectory reflects NBCs' inability to encounter filmsong as anything other than exotic kitsch (even if beloved): condescending, uncomprehending, and superficial. The songs that are highlighted tend to be those lending themselves readily to kitschification, such as Jaan pehechan ho (Lets get to know each other) and Dum maro dum. (2008, 268)

Indeed, it is worth briefly discussing the circulation of the song Jaan Pehechan Ho in the West as this has much to tell us about the processes underpinning this growing subcultural interest in Indian cinema. The song initially appeared in the film *Gumnaam/Unknown* (Nawathe, 1965) and most accounts of its circulation within the US underground begin with the moment a clip was played by Lux Interior, singer in the American punk group The Cramps, on his Los Angeles television show Request Video. Subsequently, bootleg tapes circulated amongst underground music fans, the song appeared on numerous video mixtapes, and it was broadcasted regularly on New York cable access programme WFMU-TV in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Novak 2010, 47). The song became so prevalent that Chan describes it as the 'predominant metonym for Bollywood cinema as a whole in underground music culture' (2008, 271). The cult interest in the song grew to such an extent that it was covered by a number of Western rock bands including Heavenly Ten Stems in 1997 and Bombay Royale in 2012, and it even appeared in a Tarantino-inspired advert for Heineken



in 2011. Perhaps, however, the most iconic adoption of the song came in the American indie film *Ghost World* (2001).

In the opening sequence of the film, the alienated teenage protagonist Enid dances to a videorecording of Jaan Pehechan Ho, with director Terry Zwigoff cutting between the Bollywood sequence and a tracking shot past the windows of the American suburban families from whom Enid wishes to escape. The camera then arrives at her bedroom window where she is dancing along to the song, attempting to imitate Laxmi Chhaya's distinctive style. Throughout the film, Enid is seeking escape through the adoption of a bricolage of various cultural forms – from the blues music of African-American Skip James through to the fashions of late 1970s British punk rock – and it is clear that her dancing to Jaan Pehechan Ho is representative of her attempt to escape from American suburbia and to imagine an alternative life. As Bhaskar Sarkar notes, 'A rather mainstream, generic artifact from another culture is deployed, out of context, to not only signal a sensitive young woman's disaffection with her own cultural milieu, but also imagine an alternative, subcultural realm of belonging' (2010, 35). It is this attempt to imagine an 'alternative, subcultural realm of belonging' that I would argue lies at the heart of this spread of cult cosmopolitanism, although this cultural openness works in tension with the increased emphasis on exoticisation. For example, Daniel Clowes, the author of the graphic novel that *Ghost World* was based on, encountered the song as part of the underground circuit of mixtapes and trading of ephemeral clips that I was describing earlier. Recounting his initial viewing of the clip, he explains:

A friend of mine ... has this great collection of video detritus like that, just stuff that he's taped. And so my friend made a bunch of tapes of stuff while he was staying there and said, 'Hey, you gotta see this Indian video.' It was a really grainy, horrible version of it, but it was the most amazing thing I've seen in my life! 'What is this?' (as qtd in Novak 2010, 48)

Clowes' response to the filmsong parallels the one described by David Bordwell in his account of Hong Kong martial arts fans where 'The fan's spontaneous 'Whoa, where did *this* come from?' becomes a self-conscious principle, a connoisseurship of radical weirdness' (2011, 58). As I will discuss in the next section, this response is emblematic of the exoticised form of cultural encounter within the fandom surrounding Indian genre cinemas, and has much to tell us about this phenomenon of cult cosmopolitanism.

## The wildest and weirdest in global cinema

In an article in *Film Comment*, where he discusses the reception of Hindi films in America, Jacob Levich critiques the ways in which Bollywood movies are sold to non-Indian audiences in the following terms: 'It's zany, extravagant, kitschy. It's delightfully (or fabulously) cheesy (or tacky). It's mad, wild, wacky, over-the-top. Campy. Exotic. Transgressive. Liberating. Et cetera. Et cetera. Et cetera' (2002, 48). The problem, Levich argues, is that this is the 'vocabulary of cult-movie special pleading, equally handy for touting direct-to-video horror, chopsocky extravaganzas, and all-midget musical Westerns' and that this language is ultimately self-congratulatory, suggesting that: 'Aren't we special for loving this unconventional, demotic, multicultural stuff? And aren't we, well, ever so slightly superior to it?' (ibid.) The tensions here between love and condescension are to be found throughout the cult reception of Indian cinemas. Consider, for example, three specific examples of this burgeoning cinephilic engagement with Indian cinema: Todd Stadtman's reviews on his international pulp cinema blog *Die, Danger, Die Die, Kill!*, many of which were collected

together in his book *Funky Bollywood: The Wild World of 1970s Indian Action Cinema* (2015); Tim Paxton's regular column on Indian Fantastic Cinema in the fanzines *Weng's Chop* (2012-) and *Monster!* (2013-); and Jared Auner's reviews on his blog site *Worldweird Cinema*. These are part of a broader cinephilic community of non-diasporic fans of Indian cinema that ranges from the Bollywood-focused blogs of Beth Watkins and Greta Kaemmer (*Beth Loves Bollywood* and *Memsaab Story*, respectively) through to the more expansive remit of global pop culture blogs such as *The Cultural Gutter* and *Teleport City*. In particular, Stadtman, Paxton and Auner are part of a cult cinephilic community that celebrates the 'weird and wonderful' of world cinema, harking back to the work of Pete Tombs, and it is important to note that none of them position themselves solely as specialists in Indian cinema but, rather, identify their interests as 'world pop cinema' (Stadtman), 'worldweird cinema' (Auner), or 'the wildest and weirdest in global cinema!' (Paxton). These writers are drawing attention to areas of Indian cinema history that have generally been downplayed or omitted in earlier accounts, such as Todd Stadtman's research into the 1970s cycle of 'Curry Westerns' like *Kaala Sona/Black Gold* (Nagaich, 1975) and *Khote Sikkay/Counterfeit Coins* (Bedi, 1974); Tim Paxton's research into numerous disreputable genres of Indian fantastic cinema such as creature features, snake films, and sex-horror pictures; and Jared Auner's work on rape-revenge films such as *Rani Mera Naam/My Name is Rani* (Doss, 1972) and *Vasna Ki Aag/Fire of Desire* (Sinha, 1987). Importantly, however, none of these writers speak Hindi and are quite open about that fact – their reviews often admitting that the film under discussion is unsubtitled and therefore they can't be fully sure about what is happening – and the issue of this initial lack of cultural knowledge and lack of linguistic understanding partly explains where the discourse of the exotic comes from. Nevertheless, this initial encounter with Indian cinema – the spontaneous 'Whoa, where did *this* come from?' described by Bordwell as emblematic of this kind of subcultural enthusiasm – is part of a longer process of cross-cultural engagement and it is important that we address the roots of this phenomenon.

While much of the canon of Western cult cinema has already been written about extensively, these reviewers are deliberately seeking out films that have never even been released in the West. As Ernest Mathijs and Jamie Sexton have identified in the worldwide appreciation of obscurity: 'In these explorations the emphasis is not on the cult following of these films, but rather on the discovery, for Western audiences, of a form of cinema hitherto hidden' (2011, 130). These films, therefore, are framed as cult objects primarily because of their relative obscurity and novelty for Western fans, even if there is little evidence of cult interest in their country of origin, and it is this novelty which provides the requisite 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995) for the films to be positioned as 'cult'. In other words, the struggle for distinction partly relies upon the discovery of films outside of the existing canon which are believed to have some form of 'cult potential' (Hills 2002, 103), often in terms of a perceived 'weirdness', and this discovery helps to affirm the fan's privileged status within the cult cinema fandom. As Jeffrey Sconce has argued, the 'explicit manifesto of paracinematic culture is to valorize all forms of cinematic "trash", whether such films have been either explicitly rejected or simply ignored by legitimate film culture' (1995, 372) and these fans of 'worldweird' cinema are extending this search for cinematic 'trash' beyond the established Western canon into new cinematic realms. Crucially, this has 'both a pioneering and an orientalisising function' making 'available new kinds of films to curious cinephiles and potential fans (thus enabling a cult following) while also framing these films as perennial

“curiosities” (Mathijs and Sexton 2011, 130). Indeed, this interest in the wildest and weirdest in global cinema leads some cinephiles to invest a significant amount of fan labour into tracking down the rarest and most obscure titles in order to find more films that might elicit exactly the kind of spontaneous response of shock and pleasure that Bordwell described.

It is significant, therefore, that Stadtman, Paxton and Auner have each written about their encounter with Indian cinema as part of a journey across various different national cinemas in order to seek out ever more exotic experiences. In the introduction to *Funky Bollywood*, for example, Todd Stadtman addresses the assumed reader, enticing them to watch Indian films:

Perhaps ... like me, you've exhausted the highs that classic Asian action and grindhouse cinema once provided and have gone on to sample more exotic celluloid delicacies, things like Mexican lucha libre films and Turkish superhero mash-ups. And, even then, you've still found yourself wanting more. (2015, viii–ix)

What we see here are the ways in which cultists' reception of global popular cinema often betrays a tension between a desire to celebrate the cinema of other cultures and a fetishisation of cultural difference, and the culinary metaphor is significant, as this kind of cross-cultural encounter is often framed through discourses of food and exoticism.

This self-conscious seeking out of further exotic experiences is also reflected in Tim Paxton's introductory column for *Weng's Chop*, in which he attempts to sum up the appeal of Indian cinema for a cult cinema fan:

The major appeal that these films have for me is their sheer exotic quality ... In some ways, my randomly buying VCDs and DVDs is not unlike peeling an onion and each layer leads me to a new slew of bizarre movies from India, Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Turkey and other countries. (2012, 52)

As we can see here, it is this search for novelty framed through perceived weirdness and cultural difference that lies at the heart of these processes. Interestingly, these statements often include a qualifier, explaining that these films are not for every cult fan, but only those dedicated fans that are looking specifically for this kind of exotic experience. When Jared Auner reviews the Pakistani film *Haseena Atom Bomb* (1990), for example, he warns the reader that:

South Asian films are a bit of an acquired taste, and can be utter torture to some. But if you've cut your teeth on the films of Italy and Hong Kong, and moved on to Indonesia and Turkey but are looking for something a little further out, then the low budget cinema of India and Pakistan might just be thing [*sic*] you're lookin' for. (2006)

This emphasis upon travelling from one country to another suggests that once the exotic appeal of one national cinema has been sated, these cinephiles need to move on to another cinema to achieve that same kind of response. This relates to the constitutive paradox of exoticism that Tzvetan Todorov describes in which 'knowledge is incompatible with exoticism' (1993, 265), in that once the fan has acquired sufficient knowledge of a specific national cinema and cultural tradition it no longer provides the same pleasures of exoticism that it once offered. It is the culture shock that comes from this lack of familiarity with a national cinema that underpins its appeal for these fans, and this is a pleasure that inevitably offers diminishing returns. Reflecting this attitude, Kim Newman notes in his preface to *Fear Without Frontiers: Horror Cinema Across the Globe* that:

The high amazement factor found in many films discussed here comes as much from unfamiliarity as from genuine worth: watching one Indian, Malaysian or Hong Kong picture

is a revelation, but ploughing through fifty will reveal conventions and clichés as prevalent and ultimately as limiting as those that obtain in the American slasher film. (2003, 10)

To some academic critics, it is precisely this initial emphasis on the exotic and the pleasures resulting from a lack of cultural knowledge that makes this form of fan engagement problematic. Bhaskar Sarkar, for example, has critiqued the ways in which North American fans have ascribed cult value to Hong Kong martial arts films:

Sometime in the mid-1990s, while pondering on the reception of Hong Kong genre films in my neighbourhood in Los Angeles, I was miffed at the way in which the local cine-cognoscenti turned martial arts and ghost films into zany and inscrutable objects from a distant and wacky culture – objects that they loved, and loved to lampoon. Knowledge of these ‘cult’ films was cultural capital in these cine-subcultures, raising the hipster quotient of their unofficial members. (2010, 34)

Part of the problem for Sarkar, as he described in an earlier article, is that he

cannot help worrying that behind this fond and enthusiastic [engagement] is a thorough dismissal of the reality of Hong Kong, of the lived experiences and sensibilities of its people; that, like so many other cool postmodern artefacts, these films are being consumed without much understanding of the contexts in which they were produced. (2001, 159)

He later identifies ‘similar poles of fascination and disdain’ at play in the subsequent reception of Indian cinema, ‘as these self-styled cosmopolitan audiences discovered and learned to love and laugh at yet another alien culture industry’ (2010, 34). Similarly, Edward Chan complains that the ‘Western appreciation of Bollywood and Hong Kong action cinema is qualitatively different from the admiration devoted to a Satyajit Ray or a Wong Kar Wai’ as it is framed through an ‘exoticisation marked by kitsch’ (2008, 264). Unlike the often unequivocal praise reserved for art cinema and prestige pictures, cult reception practices often rely on a combination of celebration and mockery in their engagement with their object of affection, and this clearly raises issues of relative power when the reception is across cultures.

Nevertheless, while I am definitely sympathetic to the positions outlined by Sarkar and Chan, I think there is some elitism at play in these distinctions between the reception of popular and art cinemas, and we should be wary of dismissing entirely this form of cosmopolitan engagement with international popular cinema. Instead, I would like to suggest that we take this cult cosmopolitanism seriously as part of a more prolonged process of cultural engagement. The phenomenon relies upon an exoticisation of cultural difference through a focus on elements that are perceived to be weird and/or bizarre, but it also reflects a sincere desire to discover and celebrate overlooked areas of global popular culture. As various scholars have acknowledged, cult reception practices often rely on a celebration of – and to some extent fetishisation of – alterity and otherness. In the introduction to their *Cult Film Reader*, Ernest Mathijs and Xavier Mendik list a number of factors that help define a cult film. One of these factors is ‘strangeness’ meaning that ‘some films may seem “normal” to their home cultures, but become objects of curiosity once they leave that context’ (2008, 8). Indeed, in one of the very first academic accounts of cult, Timothy Corrigan notes that ‘with cult movies, as opposed to most other films, audiences seek out not only the unfamiliar in character and story, but the unfamiliar style, frame and imagistic texture’ (1991, 26). In this respect, therefore, he argues that:

cult movies are always after a fashion foreign films: the images are especially exotic; the viewer uniquely touristic; and within that relationship viewers go to places, see things, and manipulate

customs in a way that no indigenous member of that culture or mainstream filmgoer normally could ... Cultural distance allows for the textual transformation of cult audiences. (1991, 27)

Crucially, Corrigan was talking metaphorically here – his focus was on the domestic audiences for American cult films such as *Pink Flamingos* (1972) and *Attack of the Killer Tomatoes* (1978) – but his quote is rather appropriate once we do interrogate the cross-cultural dimensions of cult reception. When Corrigan argues that the cult viewer is uniquely touristic, going places and seeing things that no mainstream filmgoer normally could, we can see its relevance to the ways in which fans such as Stadtman, Paxton and Auner assert their subcultural credentials through their engagements with a series of different cultural contexts. It is clear that these cult cosmopolitans may be attempting to move beyond the culture of their local community and embrace cultural difference, yet, at its worst, this reception can seem to reinforce problematic orientalist fantasies of the exotic. The repeated emphasis upon weird and bizarre elements is part of an exoticisation of other cultures, especially since this reception can sometimes display a lack of comprehension – of the language, of the culture, and of the historical context from which these forms emerged.

Yet, I would contend that this exotic encounter is only an initial stage of a longer process of cultural engagement. For example, Tim Paxton in that first issue of *Weng's Chop* may admit that the major appeal of these films is their 'sheer exotic quality', and within traditional models of exoticisation this would imply that he would soon move onto other cultural contexts once this exoticism is sated through knowledge, but actually this initial engagement has developed such that in later issues he has begun mapping out areas of Indian cinema that have had almost nothing written about them – in English or in Hindi – and he has educated himself and subsequently his readers on numerous cycles within Indian cinema and how they relate to local histories and traditions. While he may be far from the idealised figure of the cosmopolitan, I would contend that Paxton's work reflects instead what Kevin Robins has termed 'good-enough cosmopolitanism' (2010, 420) – a concept which shifts us away from a focus on abstraction to engage instead with lived experiences of cross-cultural encounter. Emphasising a more realistic and grounded form of cosmopolitanism, Robins' concept encourages us to move beyond elite dismissals of less-than-ideal cultural engagements, and instead focus our attention on the sometimes messy and complicated ways in which different cultures actually interact. Of course, more work needs to be done to investigate the series of longer term processes that I've been describing and to study to what extent these cult reception practices are developing into genuinely deeper cross-cultural engagements. In addition, it is equally important that we pay further attention to the power relationships that underpin these transnational forms of cult cosmopolitanism. The fandom discussed in this article does little to dispel Sconce's assertion that the paracinematic community 'embodies primarily a male, white, middle-class, and "educated" perspective on the cinema' (1995, 375)<sup>2</sup> and it is clear that we need to do more to address the underlying relations of power around race, gender and class that clearly shape these forms of cross-cultural encounter. Nevertheless, it is my contention that the desire to seek out and engage with a foreign culture, even while initially focused on the exotic, still has the potential to grow into a greater cultural engagement in the future. This is not an apolitical position, therefore, but an intervention in the debates surrounding the potential for cross-cultural dialogue more generally. As Ien Ang reflects in her book *On Not Speaking Chinese: Living Between Asia and the West*:

One of the most urgent predicaments of our time can be described in deceptively simple terms: how are we to live together in this new century? ... What are the possibilities of constructing transcultural imagined communities in this era of rampant cultural differentiation and fragmentation? How, in short, can we live together-in-difference? (2001, 193)

In this article, I have focused upon the community of cult cinema fans who celebrate 'world-weird' cinema in order to explore the issues that this raises for constructing transcultural imagined communities. While this article has only been a preliminary survey of the issues raised by this topic, I hope that future scholarship will address the implications that these processes of cult cosmopolitanism have for our understanding of subcultural film reception more broadly.

## Notes

1. The eight films that they include are *Aakhri Adalat* (1988), *Champion* (2000), *Elaan* (1994), *Gumnaam* (1965), *Hum Paanch* (1980), *Mahal* (1948), *Raat* (1991) and *Sholay* (1975). As will be evident to readers familiar with Hindi genre cinema, this is hardly a representative sample of 'Action and Cult' cinema from India.
2. It should be noted, however, that the non-diasporic interest in Bollywood more generally (rather than the fandom surrounding cult Bollywood that I have focused on in this article) is often more prevalent amongst female fans. Future work might therefore explore the implications that this has for our understanding of the gendered nature of cult fandom.

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